UNITED
NATIONS

E

Economic and Social
Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/1997/99
9 July 1997

Original: ENGLISH

Substantive session of 1997
Geneva, 30 June-25 July 1997
Agenda item 6 (i)

COORDINATION, PROGRAMME AND OTHER QUESTIONS: PROCLAMATION OF INTERNATIONAL YEARS

Note verbale dated 8 July 1997 from the Permanent Mission of Japan to the International Organizations in Geneva addressed to the United Nations Office in Geneva

The Permanent Mission of Japan to the International Organizations in Geneva has the honour to attach herewith the explanatory note with regard to the draft resolution to be before the Economic and Social Council (E/1997/L.24) on the question of the proclamation of the year 2001 as the international year of volunteers.

The Permanent Mission of Japan has further the honour to request the Secretariat of the United Nations Office in Geneva to have the explanatory note circulated as an official document of the Council.

GE.97-62602 (E)

Annex

EXPLANATORY NOTE

Background

1. The concept of an International Year of Volunteers emerged at a Policy Forum held jointly by the United Nations Volunteers programme (UNV) and the United Nations University in Tokyo in February 1996. The concept arose also in deliberations of several major international non-governmental organizations, such as the International Association for Volunteer Effort, the European Volunteer Centre and the World Young Women's Christian Association. The idea was also endorsed by the 40 volunteer-sending organizations attending the Conference on International Volunteerism, held in Washington, D.C. in May 1996, on the occasion of the thirty-fifth anniversary of the Peace Corps and the twenty-fifth anniversary of UNV.

2. At the annual session of the Executive Board of the United Nations Development Programme/United Nations Population Fund, held in May 1996, the Executive Board, in response to Japan's initiative, took note of a proposal "to consider having the International Year of Volunteers 2001 as one of the instruments to promote volunteers".

3. In February 1997, at its 1997 organizational session the Economic and Social Council, in its decision 1997/201, agreed to a proposal made by the Government of Japan to place the international year of volunteers on the agenda of its 1997 substantive session.

Objectives and outline

4. Volunteer service - the contribution that individuals make as non-profit, non-wage and non-career action for the well-being of those less fortunate - has been a part of every civilization and society. The need for such volunteer effort is greater today than ever, given the adverse impact of global problems such as environmental degradation, drug abuse or HIV/AIDS on the more vulnerable sectors of society, given the concern of the international community for the eradication of poverty and given the contemporary trend for civil society, in partnership with Governments and the private sector, to assume ever greater responsibilities in the development process. Yet, while the contribution of volunteers is vast, much of their work often goes unrecognized, precisely because it does not involve the payment of market wages and because it is often spontaneous, informal and unstructured.

5. When the Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake struck in 1995 and when the Nakhodka oil pollution incident occurred this year, many volunteers from throughout Japan rushed to the stricken areas and this had the effect of raising the Japanese people's awareness of volunteer activities. The Japanese Government intends to turn such disasters into an opportunity to further heighten the Japanese people's awareness and understanding of volunteer activities and to foster an environment conducive to promoting volunteers' activities of this kind in Japan.

6. The Government of Japan feels that proclamation of an International Year of Volunteers would extend recognition and increased legitimacy to volunteering and, as a result, would expand significantly the number of people willing to offer their services. Volunteer movements would receive valuable impetus in industrialized, developing countries, as well as those in economic transition alike. Such a Year would engender a favourable environment for the sharing of best practices and would assist in associating the volunteer movement yet more closely with the key concerns of the United Nations as articulated through the series of summits and conferences up to 1996.

7. The specific objectives of the Year would be increased recognition, facilitation, networking and promotion of volunteer service. As the forms and status of volunteers vary by country and region, the Year would be engendered from the locality and grassroots upward, concentrating on the local community, the citizen's group, the village, the inhabitants of the megacity, and not on a world summit on volunteerism. In this way, there should be no financial burden on Member States.

8. In terms of recognition, every opportunity should be taken to describe and quantify the contribution of the voluntary sector to national welfare and advancement; awards might be instituted for innovative individual, group, community and national volunteer actions. To facilitate volunteer service, each society, which is best placed to judge what would most encourage such service among its people, could take concrete measures to enable volunteering, for instance, technical, management and accountability training. The media, from an Internet discussion forum to rural radio broadcasts, could assist in networking best practice locally, at provincial level and between countries. Finally, promotional efforts might be aimed at attracting more requests for the deployment of volunteers, at attracting offers of service from new candidates and generally creating a climate of opinion ever more supportive of voluntary action.

Next steps

9. At the 1997 substantive session of the Council, Japan will propose the adoption of a resolution stating that the Council recommends to the General Assembly the proclamation of 2001 the International Year of Volunteers.

10. At the fifty-second session of the Assembly, starting from September this year, Japan will propose the adoption of a resolution stating that the Assembly proclaims 2001 the International Year of Volunteers.